PANDEMIC PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE: POLICY BRIEF

Integration of Gender, human rights, equity, last mile community and civil societies inclusion into pandemic preparedness and response and the one health framework

COPPER

ACT
AFRICA COALITION ON TUBERCULOSIS

CISMAT-SL

Background

Sierra Leone is faced with multiple public health challenges simultaneously. The current surge in mpox with nearly 4500 confirmed cases in just six months, provides a unique example of recurring public health challenges faced by the Sierra Leone health system and exposed critical vulnerabilities in pandemic preparedness and response and the broader health infrastructure. In response to the surge in cases, the Government of Sierra Leone, through the Ministry of Health and the National Public Health Agency, initiated coordinated interventions to contain the outbreak and mitigate its impact building on existing systems, including one health.

Despite progress in pandemic preparedness and response, there is still a lack of clear frameworks for inclusivity of last mile communities (i.e. those affected by the disease), human rights, equity and gender norms. To effectively manage mpox and future pandemics or epidemics, the Sierra Leone's health system must diversify to partner with last mile communities and integrate equity, human rights and gender frameworks.

Integration of gender, equity, and human rights frameworks into the one health domain and pandemic preparedness and response should not simply be an epidemic-based approach; it requires a permanent partnership. Inclusion of last mile communities and civil society in pandemic preparedness and response and the One Health ecosystem should be holistic and include their participation in the decision-making process. This policy brief describes the recommended approach to the inclusivity of gender, human rights, equity, last mile community and civil society frameworks.

Integrating gender, human rights, equity and last-mile communities into pandemic preparedness and response and the One Health framework offers a pragmatic, cost-effective and community-sensitive solutions.

Rationale for integration

Health System Optimization

- Equity-driven pandemic preparedness and response will reduce stigma and discrimination and enable access to health services.
- Breaking down human rights barriers will optimize the utilization of health services.

Improved Community Engagement and Compliance

- Including last-mile communities and civil society in pandemic preparedness and response can reduce fear, stigma and resistance, and encourage earlier reporting and testing.
- Integrating last mile communities and civil societies will strengthen community trust through a more respectful and people-centered approach.

Alignment with the laws and regulations of Sierra Leone

- The Human Rights Act No. 9 of 2004 establishes the premise to protect and promote human rights of the population, including monitoring human right violations and related issues.
- The provisions of the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Act of 2022 are to promote gender related domains in all sectors of governance in Sierra Leone.

Alignment with Global Best Practices

- The Global Fund and the United Nations agencies endorse the integration of equity, human rights, gender, last mile communities and civil societies into pandemic preparedness and response.
- Many countries in Africa are reviewing their policies to integrate gender, human rights, equity, and last mile communities into pandemic preparedness and response.

Consolidated Community and Civil Society approaches

- The current last mile community and civil society activities on pandemic preparedness and one health are fragmented and uncoordinated. A coordinated and consolidated civil society and last mile community will address the interest of all the last mile communities and civil society organizations.

Policy recommendations

The Government of Sierra Leone and its development partners are strongly encouraged to integrate gender, human rights, equity, the last mile, civil society into all aspects of the One Health Framework and pandemic preparedness and response.

The Government of Sierra Leone, its development partners, civil society and communities should:

- Design and implement a comprehensive set of activities to promote human rights, including those to eliminate stigma and discrimination, promote social justice and reduce social exclusion. The package should also include interventions to protect communities from human rights violations and all forms of violence, system for reporting human rights violations and mechanisms for mutual engagement and respect between last mile communities and government functionaries in pandemic preparedness and response and implementation of the one health framework.
- Establish mechanisms to promote gender equality, gender responsive budgeting, gender mainstreaming, gender balance, gender analysis and gender sensitization and empowerment in pandemic preparedness and response and in the One Health framework. The government should expedite the implementation of the provisions of the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Act of 2022.
- Embed equity and inclusion in pandemic preparedness and response and one health strategies by mainstreaming equity, and ensuring disability inclusion and last mile community participation in NAHPS 2025–2029.

- Expand inclusive risk communication and community engagement strategies to directly integrate last mile communities into the pandemic preparedness and response and the one health framework. The strategy should promote culturally appropriate, inclusive risk communication for last-mile, non-literate, and disabled populations, formalize two-way community engagement mechanisms, and involve community-based organizations, faith groups, and traditional leaders in mobilization and education.
- Engage civil society, vulnerable groups and "last mile" communities (e.g. people who are ill or affected by disease) in the development and implementation of One Health and pandemic preparedness and response policies and plans.
- Strengthen Governance and Accountability Mechanisms. Platforms should be established to monitor the integration of human rights, the last mile community, gender, equity and civil society in pandemic preparedness and response, and in the One Health framework. Government and other stakeholders should support inclusive participation in the JEE, SPAR, and IHR-related assessments with diverse representation, enhance transparency and accountability to build trust in health emergency responses and revise the national One Health Governance Manual to include technical working groups on civil societies, last mile communities, human rights and gender.
- Establish and operationalize a national civil society and community coalition on one health, pandemic preparedness and response and primary healthcare.

Conclusion

Integrating equity, gender, human rights, last-mile communities, and civil society into pandemic preparedness and response is both feasible and urgent. It enhances the effectiveness of pandemic preparedness and response and the One Health framework, and strengthens the resilience of health systems. The integration of equity, human rights, gender, last mile communities and civil society will lead to investments, with strong support from the government and development partners.